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Taboo, Transgression, and Literature: An Introduction

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Absolute freedom from taboos is a taboo as well, and not even a humane one

—Kaltenbrunner

[T]aboo, by carving out a part of the world, carves out a self

—Gell

Both temporally and geographically, the phenomena of taboo and transgression can be considered omnipresent, that is existent in all societies or cultures and at all times.

If the ubiquity of taboos and their influence on social structures is generally accepted with regard to the past, which a narcissistic and supposedly enlightened present all too often views with condescension if not outright derision, what is remarkable is the fact that taboos not only continue to exist but that they can actually be said to be flourishing. A brief reference to the recent debates on political correctness, to shibboleths in relation to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, or to the ongoing question of how to deal with topics such as the Holocaust,[1] should suffice to make this point clear. Specifically with reference to the British literary scene, one could, of course, also mention the more than thirty years of censorship imposed on D.H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the uproar surrounding the staging of Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* and Edward Bond's *Saved*, or the outburst of violence following the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, so brilliantly portrayed in Hanif Kureishi's novel *The Black Album*. Thus, even in modern or postmodern and

supposedly enlightened Western societies, taboos are still pervasive, the controversies just mentioned being only the tip of the iceberg of an ongoing cultural struggle with, against and in favor of taboos; a struggle which, as the above examples demonstrate, is especially well reflected, documented and hard fought in literature and the arts, and which ultimately can be traced back to the very origins of humankind. Wilhelm Wundt has called taboos "the oldest unwritten code of humanity" (Thody 312),[2] Sigmund Freud takes parricide and the ensuing incest taboo as constitutive of society,[3] and Philip Thody correctly concludes that "the impression given by most anthropologists is that the incest taboo is an even more important sign of our humanity than the development of language, the use of tools, or the obligation we feel to care for the old and the infirm" (37).[4]

Considering that taboos are remarkably ambiguous and multifaceted phenomena, differing from period to period and from culture to culture, it is surprising that there has been no detailed, historically oriented and theoretically up-to-date study that analyses how British culture and literature in particular have dealt with this topic. It is for these reasons that *Taboo and Transgression in British Literature* undertakes to offer exemplary model analyses of representative primary texts. The approach adopted here traces the complex dynamic and ongoing negotiation of notions of taboo and transgression as an essential though often neglected facet to understanding the development, production and conception of literature and literariness from the early modern Elizabethan period through to recent postmodern debates, covering almost fifty representative authors and œuvres. It is, of course, true that the concepts of taboo and transgression have for quite some time been the focus of a whole array of different perspectives ranging from children's and youth literature or fairy tales via sociology to cultural anthropology, philosophy, media studies, aesthetics, psychoanalysis and psycho-linguistics. Moreover, many popular science books as well as dictionaries on the subject[5] bear witness to the still unbroken interest of a broad public in this interdisciplinary, not to say in several senses paradoxical topic of taboo; paradoxical because the concept of taboo has become a taboo in itself (cf. Thody 4), because taboo is generally accepted as drawing the fundamental borders between the sacred and the profane, whereas a critical glance shows that these borders can scarcely be drawn unproblematically, since not only the concept of taboo as such, but also the concept of the sacred turns out to be polysemic, if not aporetic.[6] While in most civilized societies the use of violence is

strongly tabooed, it nevertheless remains inherently if not inextricably bound up with the notion of taboo. This does not only hold true for the cultivating potential inherent to relinquishing drives, but, as Christoph Türcke argues, "above all for the fatuousness of a specific ban on thinking that individuals *en masse* subject themselves to in order to be able to endure a society they did not choose themselves and yet allow to remain as it is" (9).

Most commentators argue that there is no consensus any longer on what constitutes taboos today. As it came into common usage in Europe, taboo—already in its original meaning not exactly a precise term—has increased its semantic scope, while diminishing its terminological precision.[7] However, given that seemingly unambiguous definitions of taboo mostly hinder rather than foster the production of knowledge (cf. Eggert 19), an interdisciplinary approach encompassing cultural and literary studies, ethnology, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and psychoanalysis does create a broad space for reflection necessary for the localization and analysis of phenomena and manifestations of taboo. The broad scope of disciplines involved in theorizing taboo arises from the fact that this concept has proved central to understanding the formation of culture(s). Located at the culture / nature divide, taboos are on the level of the surface structure manifested differently depending on the society, cultural region, and time period, while on the deep structure they appear at least to a certain degree characterized by anthropological and psychoanalytical constants.

Let us, however, begin with some historical definitions and common usages of the term, before moving on to the theorization of taboo within and across a range of disciplines. The term *taboo* is of Polynesian origin and was first noted by Captain James Cook during his exploration of Tonga in the late eighteenth century. "Not one of them would sit down, or eat a bit of any thing…," he notes in his *Voyages to the Pacific*, and continues: "On expressing my surprize [*sic*] at this, they were all taboo, as they said; which word has a very comprehensive meaning; but, in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden. Why they were laid under such restraints, at present, was not explained" (qtd. in "Taboo" 2009, [n. pag.]). In a further entry, he writes: "As every thing would, very soon, be *taboo*, if any of our people, or of their own, should be found walking about, they would be knocked down with clubs" (ibid.). These two quotes from Cook's journals already identify some of the problematic elements associated with modern definitions of the term, including

a comprehensiveness of meaning as "part of a community's social codex" that extends beyond a mere prohibition on certain foods and the fact that over and beyond—indeed in contrast to—prohibitions or laws "[t]aboos are, per definition, non-existing topics" that "cannot be questioned as to their rational background" (Heinschink and Teichmann [n. pag.]; see also Thody 9).

Though there are a few examples of the term used in a transferred or figurative sense already in the first half of the nineteenth century, the notion of taboo was generally restricted to religion, and the study of 'primitive' religions in particular. As Willard Gurdon Oxtoby notes, "two terms in particular came into wide use in the description of primitive religion: mana and tabu ('taboo')," with taboo, denoting, "like 'sacred', that which is set apart from common use or contact" (513). The emergent late-Victorian discipline of anthropology, which in its early manifestations specialized in the study of foreign or alien, non-European, non-Christian cultures or religious traditions, brought the term taboo 'within the pale': "The anthropological reflection on taboo starts with the constatation . . . as postulated by philosophical Christianity" of the radical dualism of body and soul, the physical and the metaphysical, which "can rarely be found beyond it or similarly minded thought systems" (Valeri 43). Thus, the two leading British theorists of taboo in the late nineteenth century, Sir James Frazer and William Robertson Smith, argue that in contra-distinction to European, Christian 'advanced nations' primitive societies do

> not distinguish between what pertains to the gods and what pertains to the world, between spiritual and physical evil, between the holy and the unclean or polluted: he [the savage] confuses them all under a single notion of 'danger', which corresponds to a single amoral sentiment—fear. (ibid.)

Even if these definitions and distinctions belonging to the Age of Empire have subsequently been superseded, Frazer and Robertson Smith can nevertheless be seen as founding an "anthropological tradition" that firmly connects taboo and the danger of contagion / pollution, the latter being "considered as an automatic reaction from the tabooed object or person" (ibid. 44).

Also writing at the turn of the last century, but from a sociological perspective that focuses on symbolic forms, Emile Durkheim states that "a taboo is a prohibition justified by the sacredness of what is

prohibited, and this sacredness, in turn, is embodied by 'puissances redoutables' " (ibid.). For Durkheim rules such as the prohibition of incest "are too fundamental to be enforced by human agency or by human agency alone." Moreover, he also argues that "the sacred is the social in symbolic (i.e. reified) form" (ibid. 52). From this it follows that if the rules mentioned above "must be associated with forces that are as infallible and as unchallengeable as physical forces," these forces in fact derive from society itself and symbolize it. Durkheim's and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's view that taboo is essentially proscription, "the expression of a renunciatory or repressive form of morality" (ibid. 58), is then taken up by Sigmund Freud, the issues of classification and renunciation / repression being closely intertwined, so that for the latter, in his "attempts to use his theory of the unconscious to account for the two aspects of taboo to which his predecessors attracted attention: ambivalence and contagion" (ibid.), taboo is defined as:

> prohibitions of primaeval [*sic*] antiquity which were at some time externally imposed upon a generation of primitive men; they must, that is to say, no doubt have been impressed on them violently by the previous generation. These prohibitions must have concerned activities towards which there was a strong inclination. They must then have persisted from generation to generation, perhaps merely as a result of tradition transmitted through parental and social authority. (Freud 31)[8]

There are clear parallels between Freud's and Durkheim's theory: They both "identify taboo with renunciation; . . . view contagiousness as symbolic displacement" and "the ambivalence of what is tabooed as the reification of an ambivalent attitude toward it" (Valeri 59). But no matter whether taboo is linked to magic or morality, whether the psychoanalytical, sociological or anthropological dimension is more important, any comprehensive explanation must also take into account the classification of objects and the cosmological ideas that exist in particular societies. This insight prompted several 'classificatory' or 'taxonomic' theories of taboo, amongst them the work of Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas. With Leach, the notion of taboo is considerably widened, so as "to include any kind of 'prohibition, explicit and implicit, conscious and unconscious' " (ibid. 61). This allows him "to treat in the same analytic framework phenomena like aversion, disgust, judgements of inedibility or unmarriageability

(due to danger or a sense of propriety), and formal prohibitions—in sum, the whole spectrum of socially shared avoidances" (ibid.). At the basis of Leach's classificatory theory is a claim about cognition, which views taboo as the manifestation of a "kind of discriminatory repression . . . necessary to the functioning of conceptual thought." Thus, taboo "serves to discriminate categories in men's social universe," and in so doing "reduces the ambiguities of reality to clear-cut ideal types" (ibid. 63). As such, the function of taboo would be to repress "interstitial states produced by the application of discrete conceptual classes on the continuum of experience." For Leach, the fact that these interstitial states "undermine the work of classification by confusing adjacent categories" explains "their association with 'sacredness,' that is, with powers that are both contaminating and ambiguous." If taboos are considered as rules for the avoidance of such powers, and if they induce mankind to avoid the sacred, they also "keep the destructive powers of confusion at bay and help maintain the unambiguous categorization that is a prerequisite of successful communication" (ibid.).

A second classificatory approach was advanced by Mary Douglas. As the title of her analysis of taboo already suggests, for her the notion of pollution takes precedence over taboo. She combines structural-functionalist elements—"follow[ing] Radcliffe-Brown in considering pollution as a sanction, and thus as presupposing the taboo it sanctions" (ibid. 70)—with a more cognitive approach that "makes pollution primary but only by giving it some of the properties that taboo has in Leach." Drawing on Lord Chesterfield's definition of dirt as "matter out of place," Douglas argues that objects are not considered dirty in and of themselves, but because of their status or classification in a system of categories. If in the most general formulation her theory "states that pollution arises from what is residual in terms of *any* type of classification," Valeri argues that "in practice her most novel and stimulating contribution lies in associating pollution with what is out of place in terms of *one* particular kind of classification—namely taxonomy" (73). The basic issue on which the whole theory of pollution as taxonomic anomaly rests is whether it is "possible to show that everything polluting is taxonomically anomalous and everything taxonomically anomalous is polluting" (ibid. 74). The problem here is that it has been shown that taboo is produced by a "normative classification by means of prototypes, rather than by a taxonomic impulse proper" (ibid. 78), and that the "exclusive linkage of taboo with categorical intermediacy or anomaly leaves

out precisely what epitomizes taboo in both popular and anthropological discourse: the taboos on incest and cannibalism" (ibid. 83).[9] This deficit in taxonomic theories of taboo gave rise to Françoise Héritier's hypothesis that the "avoidance of the identical" is of prime importance, that is "the proscription of associating—at least with regard to eating, reproducing, and having sex—two terms that are in some crucial respect considered the same" (ibid.).[10] If with Héritier "the principle of avoided identity" is still "the counterpart of a principle of balance of contraries and thus of difference," the avoidance of identity becomes even more primary in the work of Alain Testard, for whom "taboo is concerned solely with disjoining a substance from itself, and thus with creating difference where lack of difference is implied" (ibid. 86; cf. Testard 1985 and 1991):

> Testard's theory of taboo, and more generally of symbolic efficacy, seems completely at odds with the usual structuralist and functionalist theories, particularly those of Leach and Douglas. While they stress the preservation of difference, he stresses its creation from the negation of identity. Their presuppositions are dualistic, his are monistic. Identity is for them secondary, for it presupposes a system of differences, but for him the opposite is true: identity is primary and difference is derivative. (ibid. 91)

More subject- and body-oriented theories on taboo have been formulated by Alfred Gell, Anne Meigs, Julia Kristeva and Valerio Valeri himself. Gell, for whom "taboo does not signal a self that preexists it" but is "a form of existence of the self" (ibid. 97), develops a theory that takes "taboo's role in creating a sense of personal identity and agency" into account. Arguing that taboo not only expresses but constitutes the self and that "personal identity consists in a difference from other humans which coincides with a difference in their relationship with the world" (ibid. 98), he maintains that "taboo, by carving out a part of the world, carves out a self." Such a self—and this is where Gell's theory has its shortcomings—must also, however, be located in a body, given that the relations between object and subject regulated by taboo are principally "eating, touching, and penetrating, as in killing and having sex" (ibid. 101). "All these," Valeri points out, "involve the body as desiring, that is as feeding on its objects, consuming them," so that it seems necessary to stress the "crucial element of corporeality inherent in taboo" (ibid.). Both Anna Meigs and Julia Kristeva have subsequently re-emphasized the body-centeredness

of the notion of pollution, and it is the latter in particular who has not only injected "a subjective and developmental dimension into the exclusively classificatory perspective of structuralism," but also shown how a

> subject symbolically constituted, but necessarily located in the body, must be haunted by the fear of its disintegration through the body, since it constantly experiences the body's resistance to the subject's symbolic ordering of itself. The embodied subject's fear of disintegration through the body and by the body is the ultimate basis for the notion of pollution. (ibid. 111)

From this perspective, pollution and abjection coincide as "the cultural form taken by what threatens the subject because it has to do with its precultural stage—that it is the presymbolic making itself felt in the symbolic" (ibid. 110).[11] Working within this framework, and developing upon as well as combining both Freud's critique of religion and Douglas's taxonomy of the biblical system of food taboos, Kristeva postulates a three-stage trajectory of pollution that is premised on increasing levels of abstraction moving from the primitive, via Mosaic and Levitican laws, to Christianity, where "the Christian notion of sin substitutes the Levitican notion of pollution" (ibid. 107): Whereas "Judaism externalises abjection, Christianity internalizes it" (ibid.). Kristeva thus reads the history of morality as "that of a progressive reinforcement of the 'male' principle of symbolic differentiation and order as against the 'female' principle of indifferentiation" (ibid. 106). More specifically, what has taken place in the shift from the Old Testament to the New with regard to pollution is a "reversal of the source of danger, from outside to inside, [which] correlates with a transformation of orality" (ibid.).[12]

Valeri, whose interdisciplinary approach eschews the usual distinction between anthropological and psychoanalytical approaches to the topic, argues "that the phenomenon of taboo and the various dangers that motivate it must be apprehended at the points of articulation and confrontation of the subject and the conditions—symbolic and presymbolic—of its existence" (111). For him, the "greater the embodiment of the subject,... the greater its potential permeability to external bodies," and the greater, also, "the potential that any material undermining of the body (diseases, etc.) be interpreted as the undermining of the subject." From this it follows that potentially

"any disease can be read as a pollution, and any pollution can turn into a disease" (ibid. 111f.). Thus,

> [t]he focus of the language of taboo and 'pollution' on the body as carrier of a subject that is constituted by symbolic classifications should be made evident by the concern of the symbolic classification with food, excretions, and the processes of transformation and decay of the body that are principally associated with taboo and pollution. A taboo usually marks some event or situation that is likely to threaten the integrity of the body as the seat of the integrity of the subject. But . . . this integrity of the subject may in turn depend on the integrity of a certain external object, as determined by the classificatory system at large. If the focus of interest of taboo, then, is ultimately the subject, it does not exclude—indeed, it must include—all classifications of objects that have any bearing on the subject. . . . Thus pollution, although focussed on the subject, modelled on the body's permeability to external objects, and principally concerned with the substances and processes where this permeability is located, may stray very far from them. It may . . . become entangled with all kinds of medical and magical theories and practices where they exist. Furthermore, it may be used to enforce rules, to shore up or even express hierarchical relations, and so on. (ibid. 112)

If this survey has at least given a glimpse of the different approaches to taboo ranging from traditional British cultural or social anthropology, via continental European sociology, structuralism and psychoanalysis, to post-structuralism, and if it has become apparent that these approaches are often hardly compatible in that they emphasize entirely different aspects, it seems—even at the risk of an oversimplification—necessary to offer at least something like a generally accepted working definition of taboo which the following literary analyses can take as a starting point and from which they can diverge into more specialized Durkheimian, Freudian, Kristevan, or Valerian directions and approaches. To produce this kind of general guideline or smallest common denominator of taboo and to propose a non-specialized definition, a combination of the respective entries of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* proved helpful. In both cases, a shift in the meaning and use of the term can be viewed as a productive instance of the 'margins rewriting the center' and as a measure of the impact that post-colonial discourses have had after Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* in redefining the field of anthropology.

Thus, whereas the original 1888 articles on taboo and totemism by Sir James Frazer for the *Encyclopædia Britannica* "laid the foundation for his work on *primitive* religion" (Cannon [n. pag.], emphasis added), the recent entry defines taboo more universally as "the prohibition of an action or the use of an object based on ritualistic distinctions of them either as being sacred and consecrated or as being dangerous, unclean, and accursed" ("Taboo" 2006, [n. pag.]). While this entry still stresses that taboos "were most highly developed in the Polynesian societies of the South Pacific" (ibid.), it also makes clear that "they have been present in virtually all cultures" (ibid.) and that there is an

> inconsistency between the taboos in which notions of sacredness or holiness are apparent . . . and taboos in which notions of uncleanliness were the motivating factor . . . . Generally, the prohibition that is inherent in a taboo includes the idea that a breach or defiance of the taboo will automatically be followed by some kind of trouble to the offender . . . . These misfortunes would ordinarily be regarded as accidents or bad luck, but to believers in taboos they are regarded as punishments for breaking some taboo. A person meets with an accident or has no success in a given pursuit, and, in seeking for its cause, he or others infer that he has in some manner committed a breach of taboo. . . . There is no generally accepted explanation of taboos, but there is broad agreement that the taboos current in any society tend to relate to objects and actions that are significant for the social order and that belong to the general system of social control. (ibid.)[13]

Slightly different aspects are emphasized in the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, where the meaning of taboo is defined as

> [t]he putting of a person or thing under prohibition or interdict, perpetual or temporary; the fact or condition of being so placed; the prohibition or interdict itself. Also, the institution or practice by which such prohibitions are recognized and enforced. . . . The institution is generally supposed to have had a religious or superstitious origin (certain things being considered the property of the gods or superhuman powers, and therefore forbidden to men), and to have been extended to political and social affairs, being usually controlled by the king or great chiefs in conjunction with the priests. Some things, acts, and words were permanently taboo or interdicted to the mass of the people, and others specially to women, while a temporary taboo was frequently imposed, often apparently quite arbitrarily.

Taking the survey of theoretical approaches to taboo as well as the definitions offered above as their background, the task of the articles collected in this book is to analyze the complex dynamic of intrinsic (textual) and extrinsic (contextual) transformations inherent to notions of taboo and transgression as these have developed and are represented in British literature from the Elizabethan period through to the present. As noted above, the concept—or even "idiom" (Valeri 113)—of taboo is here not understood in a narrow sense but rather viewed as comprising persons as well as locations, nutrition, the pronouncing of names (e.g., relatives) and certain actions, cultural practices and conditions (such as those regarding the dead). Moreover, the analyses will consider what functions taboos fulfill in British society at different points in time, bearing in mind that, on the one hand, taboos can be functionalized by a society to strengthen its identity (cf. the scapegoat), that they can create security since they exclude objects, actions and persons viewed as threatening and thus produce, albeit *ex negativo*, a legal sphere in which certain topics are precluded from being openly discussed, but that, on the other hand, this function can also be interpreted as a highly effective means of social control, that is as a collective system of repression and negative conventions that draw borders and help secure authority along the temporally and culturally specific axes of the sacred and the profane, the pure and the impure. Since the inherent transgressive potential and the sanctions applied for trespassing taboos provide an insight into the socio-psychological condition of a society and culture, the interdependent, overlapping discourses surrounding the concept of taboo—such as transgression and repression, innovation and conservatism, punishment and pleasure, or sadism and masochism, to name but a few—can be understood as an arena of contestation in which a society negotiates not only its values and beliefs (from the Inquisition via post-Enlightenment secularization to sexual liberation) but also its borders and power structures.

Especially as far as Western or so-called permissive, 'enlightened' or taboo-free societies are concerned, one has to ask whether this supposed liberation from taboos is not also a disguised, deferred and disavowed discursive structure of repression which excludes the abject in the form of impotency, incontinence, incest, cannibalism, insanity, implicit racism, old age and death. If as some critics argue we live in an age that prides itself "in its aversion towards taboos and in which ever more taboos are losing their erstwhile power" precisely because they are regarded as "inhuman, repressive, irrational

and archaic" (Kaltenbrunner 7), there is also "much to indicate that under the guise of an emancipatory and critically enlightened rational thinking new taboos have been created that are no less repressive than their predecessors" (ibid. 9). In this sense, maybe "the censor of old" has merely been "replaced by an authority that operates by methods that are more diffuse and subtle, in part because we have ourselves internalized them" (ibid.), and thus behind our total aversion to taboos there continue to operate coercive mechanisms that have yet to be revealed. In any event, the exploration of the paradoxical and polysemic potential of taboos does give rise to the following issues: whether taboos will remain a necessary constituent of human society in the future, in how far their transgression automatically generates new taboos, and whether or not they can be viewed as producing knowledge and furthering progress. As a matter of fact, taboos need not always "be characterized by irrational or repressive qualities; they can equally well have a 'nurturing function' . . . , that is to say have a life conserving or enhancing role, which is also therefore rational if we accept Alfred North Whitehead's definition that the inherent function of reason is 'to promote the art of life' " (ibid. 14f.). Moreover, as Kaltenbrunner contends: "[the] complete removal of taboos would destroy the fabric of human society. One taboo can be replaced by another, even the conversion of taboos from negative into positive ones (or vice versa) is possible, but taboos cannot be eliminated from people's lives." (16) This is, of course, reminiscent of Alexander Mitscherlich's line of reasoning when he calls those who would merely negate taboos fools who have not yet learned what fear means and understand nothing of the world. Especially from the perspective of psychoanalysis, "the utopia of a taboo-free society" is often considered as compromised by the fact that it was conceived by people with drives for which there are no predetermined limits regarding their satisfaction (cf. ibid. 15). It is in this sense that Thody argues that taboos "embody something of the principle of deferred gratification which Freud sees as the first step towards the process of civilization. They thus represent a practice which any culture rejects completely only at its peril" (307). From this it follows that taboos can be understood "as a means whereby society tries to hold itself together against internal decay as well as external threats" (ibid. 304), and that, although taboos are irrational "in so far as they never allow themselves to be reduced to mere means for determinate ends, it is hard to deny them 'a deeper rationality' " (Kaltenbrunner 12).

Since taboos are normally perceived of as having an emotive component, their transgression not only creates tensions and triggers mechanisms of exclusion or punishment, they can also be a catalyst for a controlled release of pent-up aggressions and libidinal energies as is the case with jokes (cf. Horlacher 2009, 17–47) or swear words (cf. Eggert and Golec 9). From this perspective, it is evident that the pleasure-inducing dimension involved in transgressing taboos has to be taken into consideration too—as does the problematic and ambivalent 'nature' of transgression itself. As Chris Jenks has emphasized, to "transgress is to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe. But to transgress is also more than this, it is to announce and even laudate [*sic*] the commandment, the law or the convention." Thus, transgression becomes "a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation" (2). But if it is defined as "that conduct which breaks rules or exceeds boundaries," what then "is the character of the cultures that provide for the appreciation or receptability of such behaviour?" (Ibid. 3) Is transgression, as some theorists would have it, central to postmodernity, is it the hallmark of an aesthetic of the modern, or is it an integral part of our history of laws, the symbolic order and taboos? Does transgressive behavior deny limits and boundaries or does it exceed and thus complete them? And doesn't every rule, limit, boundary or edge carry with it its own fracture, penetration or impulse to disobey? If transgression and excess thus become an important component of the rule, they would neither be "an abhorration nor a luxury" but rather "dynamic forces in cultural reproduction preventing stagnation by breaking the rule while simultaneously ensuring stability by reaffirming the rule" (ibid. 7). As John Jervis succinctly argues:

> The transgressive is reflexive, questioning both its own role and that of the culture that has defined it in its otherness. It is not simply a reversal, a mechanical inversion of an existing order it opposes. Transgression, unlike opposition or reversal, involves hybridization, the mixing of categories and the questioning of the boundaries that separate categories. It is not, in itself, subversion; it is not an overt and deliberate challenge to the status quo. What it does do, though, is implicitly interrogate the law, pointing not just to the specific, and frequently arbitrary, mechanisms of power on which it rests—despite its universalizing pretensions—but also to its complicity, its involvement in what it prohibits. (4)

Literature, of course, can also be understood as a phenomenon of transgression which is characterized by the fact that while literary

texts bear a clear historical imprint, they nevertheless transcend any narrow notion of mimesis which would reduce them to a mirror or straightforward representation of their 'given' reality. Since taboos are normally not the topic of open discussions but largely internalized, any form of critical questioning is realized, if at all, only through massive outside influence. Given literature's ability to constitute a discursive field in which even marginalized, aberrant voices can articulate themselves, to give voice to something which could be called 'the collective unconscious' and to transcend its time of origin (cf. Horlacher 2004, 291–329), literature becomes an extraordinarily privileged medium for the depiction and analysis of phenomena such as taboo and transgression.[14] And the more so if one considers literature with Kristeva as "the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses" (208) and as "an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the Crisis of the Word" (ibid.). However, if the transgressing of prohibitions—a transgressing of which literature is also part—is not the exception but a constitutive element of the taboo or prohibition, this means that transgression is always already codified (cf. Bataille 63ff.). Very often there exist exact definitions of when and by whom transgressive acts are allowed, one example being killing during a war.[15] Since taboos have to be communicated publicly in order to function— "The taboo is always linked to a collective public. There are no taboos that are not public." (Eggert 21)—the ambivalence between inclusion, exclusion and transgression engenders an ambivalence concerning the representation of taboos. These phenomena of prohibitions (such as aniconism) and precepts regarding representation (e.g., of the naked human body) have the effect that across the arts as well as throughout history "ritualized representations and symbolizations have been constitutive for taboos," that is to say, that "taboos reveal a genuinely aesthetic component which extends from non-linguistic symbolizations through to the standardization of aesthetics" (ibid. 22). From this in turn it follows that an approach that conceives of taboos only as social phenomena misses the point, that textual analyses need to pay attention to the strategies and the contents of symbolizations, and that aesthetic traditions need to be taken into consideration, such as, to give but one example, the modernist aesthetic of innovation which often depends on rupture and on violating taboos. Moreover, inherent to the topic of taboo and transgression is that it raises fundamental questions regarding the limits of art, its self-conception and its aesthetics based on power: "What is art allowed to do?—Is art allowed to do anything?" (Ibid.)

Given the specific qualities of literary texts as discussed above and their careful selection in this volume, the plays, novels and poems analyzed should make it possible to provide a comprehensive survey of some of the most important developments in Britain's aesthetic, religious, economic and political systems of values as these are represented in and negotiated through literature. The literary texts selected are characterized by their contemporary as well as by their historic relevance and cultural influence, so that changes and alterations in the epistemological, ideological, and discursive systems as well as in the literary techniques and aesthetics applied can be shown on a larger diachronic scale. Although aspects from Cultural Studies, New Historicism as well as functional approaches are taken into consideration, the focus is primarily within literary, not cultural studies. This manner of proceeding makes it possible to undertake close readings of major texts—ranging from the works of Shakespeare via Milton and Bunyan to Joyce and McEwan—with a view to the larger synchronic as well as diachronic patterns of thought they are part of and helped to shape, and—in a second step—to link these to the extra-literary world. For this reason, the ten literary analyses are introduced and contextualized with the help of two diachronic survey articles. The first examines the changing legal framework as well as the concomitant transformation of social norms and explores their interaction with the collective imaginary as exemplified by literature. Given the longevity of censorship in the United Kingdom, that is, the tabooing of certain literary texts, the second survey article concentrates on literary strategies for subverting or transgressing taboos, considering as well the fact that the institution or field of literature has in the past operated, and continues to, with its own specific taboo structures.[16]

Notes

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1. Cf. the debate around Dani Levy's Hitler comedy *Mein Führer—Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler*, which was released in German cinemas in early 2007.
2. Cf. also: "In so far as they predate the invention not only of religion but also of laws and philosophical speculation, they are indeed a relict of a pre-ethical stage in the evolution of human thought" (Thody 312).

3. Cf. Freud 156: "[T]he beginnings of religion, ethics, society, and art meet in the Oedipus complex."
4. Cf. also Edmund Leach, who has called the incest taboo "the great event with which culture began," and Claude Lévi-Strauss, who sees it as "the corner stone of human society" (Thody 37).
5. Cf., for example, Thody; Hoffmann; Graupmann; Holden; McDonald.
6. "Though the fundamental borderline between the sacred and the profane in defining taboo varies across cultures and epochs, even apparent borders have proved themselves paradoxical, or rather ambiguous. The word sacred derives from the Latin *sacer*, which denotes both what is holy and heinous, whereas profane denotes that which lies outside the *fanum* or sanctuary, has not been consecrated, and hence can also mean the everyday or quotidian. *Sacer* means both consecrated *and* execrated, what is both revered and repellent, and has therefore the same inherent numinous ambiguity as the originally Polynesian word *tabu*" (Kaltenbrunner 8). All translations from German texts are by Peter Stear, M.A.
7. "The uncertain etymology and origin, as well as the even more indeterminate meaning brought about through translations and circulation—ranging from 'consecrated' to 'sacrosanct', from 'inviolable' to 'forbidden'—have helped rather than hindered the dissemination of the word in Europe. Besides this, and the attraction of the exotic, one also however needs to consider the productive vacuum of an actual lexical gap. For the anti-norm or prohibition, determined by religious veneration as well as fear, by experiences undergone as well as political intentions, by the replacement of instincts lost by new bonds, for all of these there was no single word in the language, no 'obvious marker'. Taboo filled that gap, has been further 'secularized' in its meaning, reduced down to what is embarrassing and objectionable, with the latter also eventually becoming taboo" (Betz 141).
8. Cf. also Freud 34f.: "I will now sum up the respects in which light has been thrown on the nature of taboo by comparing it with the obsessional prohibitions of neurotics. Taboo is a primaeval prohibition forcibly imposed (by some authority) from outside, and directed against the most powerful longings to which human beings are subject. The desire to violate it persists in their unconscious; those who obey the taboo have an ambivalent attitude to what the taboo prohibits. The magical power that is attributed to taboo is based on the capacity for arousing temptation; and it acts like a contagion because examples are contagious and because the prohibited desire in the unconscious shifts from one thing to another. The fact that the violation of a taboo can be atoned for by a renunciation shows that renunciation lies at the basis of obedience to taboo."

9. For reasons of space, Claude Lévi-Strauss's important work on totemism and his basic thesis that "taboo creates a 'signification' which is reduced to the creation of a social difference, or rather a difference of social units" (Valeri 95) can only be mentioned in passing.
10. Françoise Héritier argues "that taboos maintain the balance of the world by proscribing the reinforcement of either of two contraries which is brought about by the summation of two or more identical (or equivalent) terms.... The taboo on incest belongs to the same logic: in order to reproduce certain relationships of contrariety in the social world, it proscribes the marital and even sexual association of people who are categorically identical" (Valeri 84).
11. Cf. ibid. 105: Ritual pollution "happens when the 'paternal' symbolic order does not sufficiently repress the 'maternal' semiotic order, when a subject that is the function of language does not completely displace a presubject that exists in the instability of the semiotic differentiation of the body." In Kristeva's interpretation, the phenomenon amounts to "a transposition into the realm of the symbolic of the borderline separating 'the territory of the body from the signifying chain' " (ibid.), which she terms "abjection: a loss of the symbolically, linguistically founded subject, a fall into its presymbolic stage, where the subject becomes lost in the object instead of constituting itself by standing against the object" (ibid. 106).
12. Cf. also: "Levitican orality is linked with eating; Christian orality is linked with speaking" (ibid. 106).
13. What we should add to these definitions is that typically, and cross-culturally, taboo appears to be primarily concerned with "the body in its exchanges with other bodies," such as decomposing, excreting, bleeding, reproducing, eating, and to define "basic social rules involved in those bodily exchanges or symbolized by them (for instance, the taboos on murder and incest, both of which are usually symbolized by a polluting flow of blood). Taboo also seems to be involved in the avoidance of sacrilege, that is, of improper relations with divinities and their appurtenances" (ibid. 48).
14. Literary texts are understood as being a central part of that "larger symbolic order by which a culture imagines its relation to the conditions of its existence" (Matus 5) and as a space "in which shared anxieties and tensions are articulated and symbolically addressed" (ibid. 7). Moreover, through active reader participation, literature renders imagination 'livable'—the fictional world can actually be experienced and can therefore be 'tested' and criticized—so that the literary text becomes a privileged space of simulation where the work on a cultural imaginary can take place (cf. Fluck).
15. Hence the 'heinous' act ascribed to the events of 9/11 as referenced above, the concomitant echoes of Pearl Harbor, the subsequent

need to invoke a 'war on terror', and the categorical indistinctness in international law when dealing with asymmetrical warfare and failed states.

16. This is exemplified by the act of canonizing certain texts or genres, which may then invite acts of transgression, thereby allowing literature to retain its critical edge and to renew itself continually.

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